DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 389 150 EC 304 437

AUTHOR Billingsley, Bonnie; And Others
TITLE Working Conditions: Administrator Support. Working Paper #5.
PUB DATE 26 May 95
NOTE 16p.; In: National Dissemination Forum on Issues Relating to Special Education Teacher Satisfaction, Retention and Attrition (Washington, DC, May 25-26, 1995); see EC 304 434.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; *Job Satisfaction; Participative Decision Making; Principals; *Quality of Working Life; School Districts; *Special Education Teachers; Surveys; *Teacher Administrator Relationship; *Teacher Attitudes; Teaching (Occupation); Urban Education

ABSTRACT

This summary report presents an integration of major findings on teachers' perceptions of working conditions, based on survey and interview data from about 375 special educators in six large urban districts. The report focuses on special educators' perceptions of administrative support at two levels--building and central office. Major findings concerning building-level support included the following issues related to the principal: lack of understanding of what teachers do in their classrooms; failure to recognize the significance of teachers' work challenges and accomplishments; limited assistance with specific problems; and reluctance to involve teachers in determining the shape of the school's special education programs. Teachers often reported that they do not feel fully included in their schools and receive limited assistance from principals in their efforts to integrate students. In regard to perceptions of central office support, most teachers formed perceptions about administrative priorities, not based on direct discussion with administrators, but rather on their interpretations of administrative decisions and/or actions taken over time. Misunderstanding was exacerbated by infrequent contact. Major conclusions included the following recommendations for administrators: (1) treat teachers like knowledgeable professionals; (2) focus on effective communication; and (3) provide assistance to teachers by helping them with their needs. Appended tables provide details of survey responses. (DB)

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WORKING PAPER # 5

Working Conditions: Administrator Support

Prepared by

Bonnie Billingsley, Ph.D.

Russell Gersten, Ph.D.

Janet Gillman, M.A.

&

Martha Morvant, M.A.

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Special Education Teacher Satisfaction, Retention, and Attrition

May 25-26, 1995

EC304431

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Teachers' Perceptions of Administrative Support
Section 2: Impact of Administrative Support on Job Satisfaction, Commitment, and Intent to Leave

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This summary report presents an integration of major findings on teachers' perceptions of working conditions based on survey and interview data from special educators in six large urban districts located throughout the country. In this section we focus on special educators' perceptions of administrative support at two levels: building and central office.

Administrative support is a multidimensional concept, involving a variety of attitudes and actions. The importance of positive working relationships between teachers and their administrators cannot be overemphasized. In each of the districts, teacher satisfaction, commitment, and intent to leave were all highly associated with administrative support.

Interestingly, however, building support and central office support were not often highly correlated with each other, suggesting that teachers view these two sources of support in distinct ways.

The following is a brief summary of major findings relating to teachers' perceptions of building and central office support.

Building Support

In discussing the influence that building administrators can have, one teacher stated it simply:

> "The principal really does make a difference. I've worked with a lot of different ones, and it matters. The personal philosophy of a site administrator can make such a difference in how a teacher will either blossom and create, or feel stifled and subjugated."

For special education teachers, issues related to the principal are key to understanding perceived satisfaction and commitment to special education teaching. Problems related frequently to:

- lack of understanding of what teachers do in their classrooms;
- failure to recognize the significance of teachers' work challenges and accomplishments;
- limited assistance with specific problems, such as discipline or integration efforts;
- reluctance to involve teachers in determining the shape of the school's special education programs.

Many teachers reported positive and supportive relationships with their building principals. However, the need for continued effort in this area is supported by the fact that sizable numbers of teachers in all districts still reported concerns.

For instance, despite emphasis on inclusive education, many teachers reported that they do not yet feel included in what goes on in their schools, and that they receive limited assistance from building principals with their efforts to integrate students.

These findings indicate that an appreciable proportion of special education teachers feel isolated, and attempts to collaborate with other teachers in the school are likely to be extremely difficult. They also point to the fact that school buildings vary greatly in the extent to which they support inclusive special education.

Central Office Support

Positive perceptions of central office support may depend on whether central offices effectively communicate and model directions for special education that make sense to teachers and that incorporate teachers' core values and priorities — namely planning for and providing instruction to students.

In most cases, teachers formed perceptions about administrative priorities, not based on direct discussion with administrators, *but rather on their interpretations of administrative decisions and/or actions taken over time.* For example, when administrators focus heavily on meeting paperwork goals, while offering little recognition to teachers for their successes with students, teachers often interpret this to mean that administrators prioritize or value legal compliance over making meaningful strides with students.

The potential for misunderstanding between teachers and central offices is exacerbated by infrequent contact. Many teachers believed that judgments or decisions were being made about their work that were not adequately informed. This sense of being managed from a distance left many teachers feeling misunderstood, undervalued, and powerless to effect change. As one teacher put it:

> "Special education teachers' hands are tied, they can do nothing, because they have to answer to people who never see the children . . . and yet make significant decisions for them."

Central office-teacher relations would benefit from increased communication regarding central office and teacher values, priorities, district policy and rationale. Teachers' concerns express an urgent need for districts to expand opportunities for meaningful exchange of ideas and relevant information. As one teacher who left poignantly concluded:

> "I always knew that if I asked for something that was going to cost money, I might get it and I might not. *But for people to feel that what I was doing was worthwhile is really what I would have wanted.*"

Teachers' Perceptions of Working Conditions

Section 2: Impact of Administrative Support on Job Satisfaction, Commitment, and Intent to Leave

This summary addresses special educators' perceptions of central office and building level support and the relationship of support to teacher job satisfaction, commitment, and retention. We present an integration of major findings on teachers' perceptions of administrative support based on interview and survey data from special educators in several large urban districts. The studies involved teachers who left special education teaching, those who intend to leave in the future, and those who plan to remain.

Administrative support is a multidimensional concept that involves a variety of attitudes and activities. **A key aspect of administrative support is treating teachers like knowledgeable professionals.** This involves treating teachers as professionals by giving them input into decisions, communicating confidence and respect in them, and demonstrating interest in teachers and their students. **Another important aspect of support is effective communication.** Helpful administrators demonstrate and communicate

knowledge about special education and other policies, are accessible to teachers, and help clarify teacher roles and responsibilities. **Finally, supportive administrators provide assistance to teachers by helping them with their needs (e.g., obtaining resources, providing staff development opportunities, giving feedback, and dealing with discipline problems).** This combination of administrator attitude and activities appears to be important to good teacher-administrator relationships.

Teachers may interact with more than one administrator on a regular basis. Special educators work not only with their principals, but also with central office administrators regarding many aspects of their work (e.g., placement of students, regulatory requirements, I.E.P.s). See appendices A and B for a comparison of teachers' ratings of principals and central office administrators in two different districts.

The Relationship of Administrative Support to Job Satisfaction, Commitment, and Attrition

Both principals and central office administrators are in positions to influence how teachers feel about their work. We found that teacher satisfaction, commitment, and attrition were associated with administrative support. For example, intent to stay in teaching was higher among general and special educators who reported higher levels of administrative support than those who reported less support. The lack of administrative support was also a frequently cited source of attrition among special educators. Approximately 25% of special educators who left one school district

indicated that the lack of administrative support was an important contributor to their decisions to leave. This finding held across three years.

Administrative support is also positively correlated with teacher commitment to the district. In one school district, the correlation between commitment and principal support was .39. The correlation between commitment and central office support was even higher (.43). Administrators also influence teachers' job satisfaction. Issues related to the principal was key to understanding teachers' perceived satisfaction.

When the administrator-teacher relationship is a significant problem, it is likely that the teacher will consider transferring to another school or district. Desiring a better or more supportive administrator was one of the most frequently mentioned reasons for desiring a transfer to another school. In one district, insufficient central office support was cited as a major reason for leaving the field of special education by almost all of the teacher leavers interviewed.

Specific Problems Related to Administrative Support

Administrators influence many different aspects of teachers' lives. Therefore, it is not surprising that our teacher interviews and surveys revealed a wide range of problems. Some frequently mentioned problems related to:

- the lack of respect/concern shown to teachers by administrators
- the lack of communication between administrators and teachers

- the lack of accessibility to the administrator
- disagreements about student placement
- the lack of assistance with discipline
- the lack of knowledge about special education and/or failure to communicate important knowledge
- administrators' concern with regulations versus programs/children
- dissimilar values between teachers and administrators
- the lack of input into decisions which influence teachers' work
- the lack of recognition for teachers' efforts and innovations
- the lack of support for specific problems (e.g., parent concerns, getting materials)

It is important to emphasize that the problems teachers reported were complex and often related to more than a single "administrative support" issue. For example, disagreement regarding the placement of a student might be related to the lack of input into the decision, the teachers' perception that the administrator did not value her input, and disagreement with the district's placement policies. The following illustrates some of the problems teachers reported with both principals and central office personnel.

The interviews exposed several problematic patterns of interaction between teachers and administrators, including frequency and purpose of contact, and the effects of these patterns on teachers' work experiences. Many teachers reported that they had little to no contact with central office administrators. Lack of contact was problematic for teachers because they perceived that

the central office held considerable decision-making power over issues that directly affected their work. Teachers believed that decisions being made about their work were not adequately informed due to low levels of administrative contact. This sense of being managed from a distance left many teachers feeling misunderstood, undervalued, and powerless to effect change. As one teacher put it, "the special education teachers' hands are tied, they can do nothing, because they have to answer to people that never see children all day long and yet make significant decisions for them."

Some teachers reported feeling that they were not valued, that there was an apparent lack of regard for their opinions, and that they were not treated as professional equals. And as one teacher put it, the important thing was not always in getting the resources, but rather in feeling that someone was out there advocating for her needs.

Principals are generally more accessible to teachers than central office personnel. The importance of the role of the building administrators was evident across the entire special education faculty of two districts. In one district, special educators were asked to identify their top three sources of work-related satisfaction, as well as the top three things they wished to change about their jobs. Relationships with site-level administrations frequently showed up as a response to either one of the other of these questions, reflecting the variation in experiences across these teachers. Similarly in another district, the entire population of special education teachers were asked what

made them want to stay or leave their present positions. Again, principals (as well as central office supervisors) were given both as reasons for staying and leaving.

Some teachers expressed an expectation that their principal have a basic understanding of what they do in their classrooms. However, principals may not understand special education programs as well as other school programs and may have only minimal training in special education. Consequently, some principals may be less effective in assisting special educators than general educators. For example, in one district general educators were significantly more likely than special educators to agree to the following statements about their principals: (a) provides current information about teaching/learning; (b) informs me about school/district policies; (c) explains reasons behind programs and practices; (d) understands my program and what I do; (e) provides leadership about what we are trying to achieve; and (f) interacts with me frequently.

Some teachers talked about the lack of interest and assistance that the principal provided to them:

> The principal was very reluctant to give me anything and seemed to be reluctant to treat me as a staff member. Her teachers were allotted certain materials and I was not. Usually it ended up that the secretary would say, "here, have a stapler." or "here's a pen." Practically the first thing out of her mouth was: "Well, whose budget are you on."

A number of teachers indicated that principals did not support them with difficult students. One teacher stated:

> It seemed the principal did not have time to be bothered about what I called severe classroom problems, such as bringing weapons to school, students hitting teachers, and other

> students. The discipline was not consistent, nor was any discipline carried out.

However, some teachers made the point that their administrators had a positive influence in their work. The following teacher noted some problems like the others, but cited the principal as key to an improvement in her situation:

> My last two years of teaching were far better than the first 7 years. The problems at the central office, state irregularities/changes in the middle of the year, and needless paper shuffles were the same at both assignments. The difference was the learning environment and the supportive administration. The most recent school had a strong academic reputation and administrators who worked for the kids. These two factors set high expectations for me the teacher as well as for the students. My classroom was a exciting place.

The opportunity to discuss work, in an open and collaborative environment, contributed to an unprecedented growth period in this teacher's career:

> I had a period of growth at this school with my current principal that I just will treasure forever because of the way that (my principal) administrates the school. She tells us what her philosophies are and what methods of teaching she thinks are the best. She gives us copies of different research and things to let us know where she is. But she doesn't push to change. She sends out little fish hooks, and if we bite, she reels us in and sends us all the places we need to go to grow in those particular areas.
>
> She was concerned about the curriculum, she was concerned about educating the kids. She didn't care whether my chalk ledger was dirty or not or whether I had bulletin boards changed every couple of weeks.

Summary and Recommendations

An important factor in understanding job satisfaction, commitment, and attrition is the extent to which teachers feel supported by their principals and central office administrators. Teachers look to administrators as sources of support and

information. Administrators need to understand how to support teachers and research about administrative support needs to be included in their training. However, it is important to note that there are not exact formulas for providing support, because support needs vary depending upon the context of the situation. Building principals and central office administrators need to periodically assess teachers' needs for support. Asking teachers to identify areas in which they need assistance and listening to teachers' concerns as they arise are important first steps. Administrators who are accessible, listen, and try to understand teachers' perspectives will likely be viewed as supportive. Further, involving teachers in decisions in areas that influence their work lives should help administrator-teacher relationships. Teachers also need to have a better understanding of some of the problems administrators must deal with and what they can realistically expect in terms of support and assistance. Teachers need to understand that administrators have many agendas and many administrators likely experience problems such as role overload themselves.

Appendix A-1
Teacher Perceptions of Central Office Supervisors' Support

My Central Office Supervisor:	Responses	Agree %	Tend to Agree %	Tend to Disagree %	Disagree %	Mean	SD
Has my respect and trust	373	61.1	26.0	8.6	4.3	3.4	0.8
Interacts with me frequently	376	29.0	34.0	20.5	16.5	2.8	1.0
Attends to my feelings and needs	377	36.1	37.1	15.6	11.1	3.0	1.0
Recognizes and appreciates the work I do	375	48.5	35.7	8.5	7.2	3.3	0.9
Provides current information about teaching/ learning	377	29.0	33.2	15.4	12.5	3.0	1.0
Provides helpful feedback about my teaching	375	37.6	36.0	12.8	13.6	3.0	1.0
Informs me about school/district policies	374	43.6	37.2	11.8	7.5	3.2	0.9
Supports my actions and ideas	373	41.8	39.7	10.7	7.8	3.2	0.9
Explains reasons behind programs and practices	375	42.7	34.4	12.8	10.1	3.1	1.0
Allows me input into decisions that affect me	373	33.5	36.2	18.2	12.1	2.9	1.0
Helps me solve problems	377	37.9	33.4	19.4	9.3	3.0	1.0
Supports me in my interactions with parents	370	46.2	36.8	10.0	7.0	3.2*	0.9
Understands my program and what I do	377	65.3	25.2	5.0	4.5	3.5	0.8
Provides leadership about what we are trying to achieve	375	48.8	29.3	14.4	7.5	3.2*	0.9
Overall score	378					3.1*	0.8

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Appendix A-2
Teacher Perceptions of Support from Site Principals

My Principal:	Responses	Agree %	Tend to Agree %	Tend to Disagree %	Disagree %	Mean	SD
Has my respect and trust	442	55.7	28.3	10.0	6.1	3.3	0.9
Interacts with me frequently	445	44.3	33.0	17.5	5.2	3.2	0.9
Attends to my feelings and needs	443	33.4	39.5	15.8	11.3	3.0	1.0
Recognizes and appreciate the work I do	442	42.1	37.8	12.0	8.1	3.1	0.9
Provides current information about teaching/ learning	442	32.6	36.0	19.7	11.8	2.9*	1.0
Provides helpful feedback about my teaching	440	30.9	39.1	17.7	12.3	2.9	1.0
Informs me about school/district policies	436	43.3	37.2	13.1	6.4	3.2*	0.9
Supports my actions and ideas	440	43.0	38.6	11.4	7.0	3.2	0.9
Explains reasons behind programs and practices	442	34.8	39.1	17.2	8.8	3.0*	0.9
Allows me input into decisions that affect me	439	38.0	33.0	18.9	10.0	3.0	1.0
Helps me solve problems	442	37.3	36.9	16.5	9.3	3.0	1.0
Supports me in my interactions with parents	440	51.4	38.9	5.9	3.9	3.4	0.8
Understands my program and what I do	445	37.8	35.7	16.9	9.7	3.0*	1.0
Provides leadership about what we are trying to achieve	443	38.1	35.4	16.5	9.9	3.0*	1.0
Overall score	445					3.1	0.8

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Appendix B.1

Special Education Teachers' Perceptions of Principal Support In Silver City Unified

Agree	Neutral	Disagree	
60	15	25	My principal (or vice principal) works with me to solve problems.
57	18	25	My principal (or vice principal) actively assists my efforts to integrate students.
62	10	28	I can count on my principal to provide appropriate assistance when a student's behavior requires it.
53	16	31	I feel included in what goes on in this school.
Very Much	**Somewhat**	**Very Little**	
34	41	25	How helpful is the feedback your receive from your principal or vice principal?
45	32	23	To what extent does your building principal understand what you do?
Satisfied	**Neutral**	**Dissatisfied**	
51	10	39	Satisfaction with quality of support and encouragement you receive.
			Frequency
Daily/ Often	**Sometimes**	**Seldom/ Never**	
50	28	22	How often principal recognizes the good teaching you do.
50	26	24	How often do you receive encouragement to try out new ideas?

Appendix B.2

Special Education Teachers' Perceptions of Central Office Support in Silver City Unified

Agree	Neutral	Disagree	
52	18	30	A contact person from special education works with me to solve problems.
45	31	24	The special education division backs me up when I need it.
Very Much	**Somewhat**	**Very Little**	
27	41	32	How helpful is the feedback you receive from your special education contact?
30	38	32	To what extent do you feel the district special education department understands what you do in your job?
			Frequency
Almost Never/ Several Xs/Yr	**Once / Month**	**Weekly/ Daily**	
64	16	20	Frequency of stress due to lack of support from special education administration.
At Least Once a /Mo.	**Several Xs/Year**	**Once /Year or Less**	
27	27	46	How often do you receive feedback from your special education contact?

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Address: c/o ERI 1400 High Street, Suite C Eugene, OR 97401	Telephone Number: ( ) Date:

Paper presented at the National Dissemination Forum on Issues Relating to Special Education, Teacher Satisfaction, Retention and Attrition (Wash DC, Mar 25-26 1985)